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**Issues of quality and professionalism of library volunteers:
reporting from a qualitative case study**

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Paper – Issues of quality and professionalism of library volunteers: reporting from a qualitative case study

September 2015

Introduction

This short paper examines the initial findings from the second phase of research for a Professional Doctorate study exploring the challenges facing public libraries in the Big Society¹, particularly focussing on the role of volunteers and issues surrounding their use.

Phase two of this research, followed on from a phase one Delphi study (Casselden et al., 2014). The Delphi study aimed to provide an overview of current opinion regarding volunteer use amongst a selection of library managers throughout England. It also helped to build links with library managers and determine possible case study participants for phase two.

Phase two of the research involved the analysis of two case study library authorities, examining differing stakeholder perspectives of volunteer use. Both library authorities were based in the North-East of England, and were Metropolitan Boroughs. As the North East has a larger proportion of areas that are deemed to be the most deprived in England (Communities and Local Government, 2010), this may or may not impact on the capacity of volunteering efforts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, in the North East of England, Local Authority spending per person reduced 23.4% in the period 2009-10 to 2014-15 (Innes and Tetlow, 2015), cuts having fallen disproportionately on those authorities which are grant reliant, and have higher levels of deprivation and population growth.

Of the case study authorities (labelled LA1 and LA2), LA1 used volunteers for purely value-added purposes (to supplement and add value to work already carried out by paid library staff), whereas LA2, in addition to the traditional use of value-added volunteers, also engaged with the development of a small number of volunteer-run libraries, which replaced staff, thereby reducing budgets.

Stakeholders in the case studies were questioned using a variety of methods: Staff were surveyed anonymously using an online questionnaire, eight library managers were interviewed, library volunteers (both value-added, and those running their own library) were questioned in four focus groups, and library users were surveyed using a researcher administered questionnaire.

The remainder of this paper will focus specifically on quality and professionalism with regard to volunteer use in public libraries, and how this impacts on what increasingly has become a hybrid model of delivery regarding 21st century public library provision.

Perceptions about volunteers and quality

The first point to consider relates to the perceptions of library users considering the current state of public libraries, and their associated use of volunteers. Library users in the case study authorities displayed a lack of knowledge regarding who was or was not a library volunteer, and were uncertain as to how their use would change in the near future.

One of the key questions asked of the stakeholders was whether there was a difference between paid staff and volunteer workers. Library staff were unanimous in their opinion that there was a difference, whereas library users were less certain, with only 60% agreeing there was a difference. Nearly two thirds (60%) of library users were unsure whether there were volunteers working in their library service, with over a quarter (26%) of library users were not sure if they had ever been helped by a volunteer in their library. This clearly identifies that library users are not always aware of who is a volunteer and who is a paid member of staff, which has implications for their assessment of service quality and performance. As people are a key determinant in service quality experience (Parasuraman et al. 1985 in Bryson, 2006 p.321), this is a key factor to consider.

Over three quarters (77%) of staff questioned agreed that staff and volunteers could work in harmony alongside each other, library users were more positive about this aspect (89%). Most staff indicated that they thought there would be the same or increased use of volunteers in the future (92%), whereas library users were less sure about the future use of volunteers in libraries, with 57% considering a similar or increased number of volunteers. Almost a third of library users (29%) were unsure about what the future held for volunteer use in public libraries.

What does a library do?

There currently exists a challenging environment in the public library sector, with many libraries adopting a reactive approach (Goulding, 2006:338) to what has increasingly become a postcode lottery. It was evident from the case study research that there is a perceived lack of understanding concerning what a public library actually does, on the part of national and local policy makers:

"I think they (central government) don't understand what libraries are, what libraries do, or the lives of people that use them." (Library manager LA1)

"I really don't think people understand the skills that librarians have, and to sort of make you another type of officer altogether, to gather payments from people of something, just undervalues everything that a library is." (Library manager LA1)

There was similar distrust of the volunteers that worked in the libraries, from certain staff members:

"You might get some very enthusiastic people, but I think it is more than having enthusiastic people, you need someone who understands what a library is." (Library manager LA1)

Regarding the concept of a volunteer-run library, there was a concern that this lack of understanding could impact greatly on the final result,

“to be honest, my feeling about volunteer run libraries, is that they aren’t libraries, they are book exchanges. I’ve got a house full of books, but it is not a library, even if I lend my books out to my friends and family or whatever, it still doesn’t make it a library.” (Library manager LA1)

This lack of understanding is well considered by Pateman and Williment (2013:59) who argue that although people think they know what a library is, ‘many (people) also have an outdated and sometimes negative image of a boring institution filled with dusty books and even dustier staff’. The recent Sieghart Review of Public libraries (Sieghart, 2014:4) confirmed further the lack of understanding on the part of decision makers regarding the value of a modern library service to a community.

Professionalism

Professionalism was a theme that arose primarily from library managers as a key concern. The lack of public controversy resulting from using volunteers to run libraries was highlighted as frustrating. When considering librarianship as a profession, an interesting parallel with other professions was given by a number of library managers in order to highlight the lack of logic with such use.

“In a way the transformation from a professionally run library to a volunteer library hasn’t thrown up as much protest as just closing a library would. It’s not particularly controversial I think – I think the community think it really is a good idea, and you know why wouldn’t they? When you are faced with, ‘close a library or run it with volunteers’, then it does seem a better option. You could do it with schools, we used to have a school in every village, again just because people might know about Maths and English, it doesn’t mean that they are going to teach children well and give a professional service?” (Library manager LA2)

It is worth noting that the volunteers, who were replacing paid staff at the volunteer-run library, acknowledged the professional nature of paid staff and the lack of value placed on their professional worth. However, there was a strong feeling amongst the volunteers questioned that they took great pride in their working, often coming from professional backgrounds themselves, albeit not in the library sector.

“Just because you volunteer, you’re not going to give a sloppy service – you are going to give the same service.” (Volunteer LA2)

Delivering a good service, as opposed to a professional service may not necessarily be the same thing; indeed a professional service may be something a volunteer can never achieve, if they misunderstand what a professional library service actually is. Larson (1997) in Goodall (2000) explores the notion of professionalism at a variety of levels. Such a phenomenon enables a particular profession to maintain a status through limited entry, and guards a particular area of knowledge by regulating and disciplining members. It also is synonymous with competence, efficiency and effectiveness.

As noted earlier, 60% of library users questioned in this research were unsure whether volunteers were used in their library service. Such confusion obviously has a bearing on perceptions of the quality of a service, and how that quality can be ensured in what has become a hybrid model of service delivery.

Service quality

Library managers raised concerns relating to the resultant service quality afforded through over-reliance on volunteers. "What is done isn't quite up to standard, you can't develop them in the same way, and they are not there as much. There is a massive difference in professional standards." (Library manager LA2)

It has already been identified that staff surveyed saw a clear difference between paid library workers and volunteers, key factors relating to knowledge and experience (39%) and training and qualifications (30%). They outlined problems with volunteer use relating to commitment and reliability (58%), accountability (31%) and confidentiality (31%), all of which impact on service standards and quality. This reflects library managers thoughts on the difference between the paid staff and volunteer workers. Library users also saw a difference, but this was less strongly felt (60%) partly due to uncertainty about who was a volunteer and who was not.

Volunteers also raised the notion of accountability as a key difference between themselves and paid staff, and the freedom that they had compared to staff, although they also acknowledged the fact that service agreements could help regulate their actions in spite of these freedoms.

Service quality can be affected by the type of people who volunteer, and the reasons why they choose to volunteer initially. Volunteers predominantly listed two types of reasons for volunteering, individual reasons, such as a love of books, or enhancing their CV; and more altruistic reasons, such as helping people, and for the good of society:

"You wouldn't volunteer if you didn't enjoy it." (Volunteer LA2)

Paine et al. (2010:25) discuss that there are a complex range of reasons for volunteering, and one can view volunteering through a series of lenses related to work, philanthropy, activism, leisure, care, participation and learning.

All volunteers questioned demonstrated a strong work ethic, often coming from professional roles, predominantly retired, and displaying a need to undertake a civic duty, often in multiple organisations. This no doubt enhanced service quality, although possibly provided challenging management for those library staff co-ordinating their efforts:

"You've got to do something rather than just sit here." (Volunteer LA1)

"We all feel passionately about it (the library) and about your local area as well." (Volunteer LA1)

Volunteers were predominantly library supporters, often having a strong past association with the library, and therefore having a pre-determined view as to what the library was:

"I've always wanted to do this since I was little. The first book I ever owned, I bought from the library. I come regularly to the central library, near where I lived. I've always wanted to do this, I always thought I would like it." (Volunteer LA2)

However, Library managers and staff were hesitant about relying on volunteers too heavily for service delivery, and stressed the importance of considering their motives for volunteering initially:

“These sets of people (volunteers) don’t want any more from the situation. They’re not looking for jobs, they’re not looking for experience, they’re just looking for something to do one afternoon a week, or because they are interested.” (Library manager LA1)

In addition the capacity of the community to volunteer differed in the case study authorities studied, and this can have an effect on the quality of volunteers recruited.

The following strategies were identified from respondents as helping to enhance the volunteering experience and improve the quality of the library service offered. These related to volunteer management and use, relationships, communication, control and accountability, and rewards.

Volunteer management and use

All respondents questioned discussed the need for volunteer use to ‘not cross a line’, and its potential sensitivity when used for taking on roles that were perceived as the fun additional tasks that staff may have previously enjoyed doing. The requirement for volunteer tasks to match their ability was expressed by library managers.

The role of active management, whereby strategies are employed by staff to ‘ensure volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way’ (Locke et al 2003 in Brodie et al., 2009:32), was of paramount importance in order to ensure a sense of belonging and loyalty.

Staff and managers considered the hidden costs of volunteers, and the challenges of managing of a group of people who were often difficult to say no to. However, they did acknowledge that with successful volunteer management, there was an added benefit of being able to more effectively plan and identify library service priorities.

Relationships

Findings from the research established that although the relationship between volunteers and the library service and staff could be reciprocal, it was at times fragile and challenged existing power relations. The concept of symbiotic mutualism (Bungartz and Bates, 2015) is an interesting parallel that can be considered, in that both sides appears to benefit from the relationship whilst preserving each other. Maintaining an equilibrium was viewed as important for ensuring service level priorities could be met:

“It’s great to have volunteers, but they are only useful if they are actually doing what you want them to do.” (Library manager LA2)

A volunteer hinted that such commitment has its limitations, “this is an enhancement to my life, this is not my life.” (Volunteer LA1)

In addition the staff survey identified the dominance of certain groups of volunteers or ‘the usual suspects’, and the exclusivity of particular social networks. This aligns with what Musick and Wilson (2008) in Brodie et al. (2009:29) identify relating to volunteers mirroring

the inequalities prevalent in wider society. The volunteers appeared on the whole to be better resourced, more educated and had wider social networks within the case study authority sample questioned.

However, the benefit of using volunteers was that it provided a link with the local community and a wider group of contacts, albeit not necessarily from all social sectors.

Communication

All stakeholders discussed the importance of volunteers needing to see the bigger picture, and understanding their role within the library service, for their involvement to be truly successful. The clear communication of library service priorities to volunteers was something Library managers saw as vital to avoid misunderstandings, as was the need to communicate on a face to face basis, rather than simply using email.

Volunteers also stressed the need to feel valued by the library service, through successful communication.

“A lot of us have got university degrees, and have had good jobs. Sometimes we’re treated a little bit.... I’m not saying we want them (qualifications) to be used, but sometimes a little bit of appreciation?” (Volunteer LA2)

Working space was identified by all respondents as having a key role in relationship development, and enabling volunteers to feel valued in addition to facilitating communication. However the blurring of boundaries, particularly for staff, was perceived as a source of potential confusion and not necessarily a good idea. Some staff considered that they felt uncomfortable sharing workspace with a volunteer who was internal to the library service, but external too, in that they were not a paid member of staff. The concept of a volunteer who is internal, yet at the same time, external to the organisation, is a challenge for those wishing to exert control of library workers.

Control and accountability

Control was an omnipresent theme that ran through many of the findings from this research. The juxtaposition of controlling people who perceive their volunteering as a leisure activity, in a work related manner is clearly evident.

Many volunteers exhibited hostility to the procedures introduced by the parent libraries arguing “all these silly rules” (volunteer LA2) were not helpful to their effective functioning as a volunteer run library. Pateman and Williment (2013:213) argue that there is a need for libraries to change the balance of power such that there is a ‘philosophical and practical shift from (a library) being a service provider for our communities to being a partner with our communities.’

This challenge between institutional power versus individual empowerment was a key theme that emerged from the research:

“You’ve got no real authority over volunteers, I mean you can put guidelines in place, but you can’t bring to bear some of the pressures you can on paid staff. You’re not offering them wages, you can’t make them stay, you have to ask nicely. You do have to always be aware

that they are not employees, they are members of the public who are helping you, and they can be a law unto themselves.” (Library manager LA1)

Volunteers who were questioned clearly understood the implications of such freedom, with regards to accountability:

“They are accountable as employees (paid library staff), we are not. The council staff are more accountable, we do have freedom because of that.” (Volunteer LA2)

Rewards

This research has reinforced the importance of building a volunteer community in the absence of monetary reward, which is vital to create a sense of belonging, and enables volunteers to see the bigger picture, from what they might initially perceive to be an individually motivated act. Indeed, Smith (2002:17) argues that ‘being and feeling, part of a team is an important reward for many volunteers’.

Most volunteers questioned demonstrated a keen loyalty to the parent library in addition to a strong customer focus, and the view that there had to be a benefit for the volunteer if the relationship was to succeed.

This perhaps reinforces the need for libraries to develop strategies to enable the retention of volunteers, thereby fostering greater skills development, and loyalty to the parent library service.

“You volunteer as an individual, but you end up being a volunteer group, it wouldn’t work individually now, we need each other”. (Volunteer LA1)

Conclusion

In conclusion the quality and professionalism of library volunteers is perhaps only as good as the volunteers who work in a particular library service. Many of the volunteers questioned appeared passionate about their library, loyal to their service and professionally minded in their approach, but all stakeholders acknowledged the challenges of controlling an entity which has the freedoms to come and go as they please.

The challenge that exists regarding the creation of a co-ordinated coherent and all-inclusive effort, which is in keeping with service level priorities, is extensive. The juxtaposition of institutional power versus individual empowerment is a delicate balance that requires careful thought and planning.

The challenge of balancing institutional power and service priorities with the devolution to individual empowerment, and community involvement is not easy. Pateman and Williment (2013 p.213) argue this challenge in the equilibrium of power is key to ensuring that library authorities make a “philosophical and practical shift from being a service provider for our communities to being a partner with our communities” and as such become fully socially inclusive.

A multiplicity of volunteer use models within public libraries exists within England at this time, no doubt as a result of political, social and environmental decisions that vary across the regions. This research has identified there are many challenges and concerns relating to

ensuring quality and professionalism in such a hybrid environment and care must be taken to ensure that checks and balances are in place to ensure that it is not to the detriment of the public library user. The importance of well-resourced management of volunteers, and the development of relationships amongst stakeholders through effective communication will help to ensure a cohesive and focussed approach. The importance of control, accountability and rewards has also been examined as key features that can enhance the experiences of staff, volunteers, service users and the resulting library service.

Key recommendations for library managers:

- Libraries need to ensure active recruitment, selection and training of volunteers. The latter will enable volunteers to understand their role and how it fits with wider service standards
- Volunteers must be carefully matched to the roles they undertake
- Volunteer passion is important for managing the intrinsic rewards afforded through volunteering
- Relationship building is vital between the different stakeholders of a hybrid library – community, staff, volunteers and users
- Clear communication is vital – between all sets of stakeholders – facilitated by workspace, and trust
- The volunteer as a group rather than an individual is a key theme – with a sense of belonging and ownership, will retain loyalty and help to ensure service quality
- Demonstrating appreciation of volunteering efforts is not to be ignored – intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are important to ensure that volunteering efforts are rewarded, and individuals feel valued.

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ⁱ The Big Society (initially the idea of Phillip Blond in Kisby (2010: 486) underpins much of the current coalition Government's policy making. It essentially is a cultural change which relies on the self-sufficiency of people, and has an agenda of social action, public service reform and community empowerment. According to Cameron (2010), the role of the Government, in order to achieve the Big Society is to 'foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action' CAMERON, D. (2010) *Transcript of a speech by the Prime Minister on the Big Society, 19 July 2010* [Online]. Available: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130109092234/http://number10.gov.uk/news/big-society-speech/> [Accessed 27 June 2013].